

San Diego 6 News

Toilet to Tap Back on the Drawing Board

Last Update: 1/26/2010 9:42 pm



SAN DIEGO - The City Council on Tuesday authorized spending \$3.28 million to hire consultants to manage a project to test the feasibility of using recycled wastewater to supplement San Diego's drinking water supply.

The City Council voted 5-3 to authorize the contract with Bay Area-based RMC Water and Environment for project management and the San Diego headquartered public relations firm Katz & Associates for public outreach.

Council members Sherri Lightner, Kevin Faulconer and Carl DeMaio were opposed.

The project is essentially a small-scale test of how the city could use treated wastewater to bolster San Diego's reservoirs. The results will be used to determine whether the city ultimately moves ahead with a so-called indirect potable reuse, or IPR, program and to secure the required health permits from the state.

During the demonstration project, no treated wastewater will be pumped into the city's drinking water supplies.

The total cost of the project is about \$11.8 million. The funds will come from an already-approved water rate hike.

Work is scheduled to begin early this year and be completed in about three years.

Lightner, an engineer, said the amount of water the city will save is negligible and comes at the expense of San Diego's "purple pipe" program, which uses treated wastewater for landscape irrigation.

"The conclusion I have come to after hours of research and the testimony tonight is that there are faster, cheaper, safer and less controversial ways to decrease our reliance on imported water and reduce our outflow at the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant," Lightner told her colleagues before the vote.

"I do not believe, and the project is not for, IPR to ever be a major source of water for San Diego," she said. "The largest number I have seen is less than 10 percent."

Councilman Todd Gloria said the contract is a "nice step in the right direction" to see if the project will work in San Diego.

"It's worth remembering that this is a demonstration project," Gloria said. "And at the end of this process, if it is successful, we will move on to a full scale indirect potable reuse system."

Council President Ben Hueso described the demonstration project as "part of the solution" to San Diego's water woes.

"It is going to create a sustainable water source," he said.

During a special evening City Council hearing, about 20 people testified in favor of the contract to move the project forward. There were no speakers in opposition.

"We need to enhance our local water supplies and IPR offers one of the best hopes for safe, reliable, cost-effective, job-creating and environmentally friendly ways to enhance those water supplies," Bruce Reznik, executive director of the environmental group San Diego Coastkeeper, testified.

Mayor Jerry Sanders has repeatedly stated his opposition to the pilot program to use recycled water to supplement San Diego's reservoirs. Sanders vetoed the City Council's action in 2007 to authorize the demonstration project. The City Council voted to override the veto.

Sanders and DeMaio have called the project "toilet-to-tap."